



Marianne Horinko, head of the EPA's Superfund program, talks with Libby asbestos victim and advocate Les Skramstad following a meeting at Libby City Hall on Tuesday.

EPA head reaffirms promises

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The EPA's top Superfund administrator assured community members Tuesday that the federal agency was on track with cleanup efforts and the government would address the enormous health care and economic development issues facing Libby.

Marianne Horinko, deputy administrator of the EPA's Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response, toured the cleanup sites in the Libby area and met with city council members, the county commissioners and community members.

"It's one thing to sit back in

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Washington, D.C., and read reports of what is happening in Libby," Horinko said. "It's another thing to come here and see the sites and meet the people."

During a visit to one of the cleanup sites, Horinko noticed that the property owner had to stop from time to time to catch his breath.

"It just drives home to you how very real this is for the folks in

Libby who are living with this every day," she said.

New EPA regional administrator Robbie Roberts was in town along with Horinko and agreed with her on the value of the personal visit.

"It was a very important and interesting subject, but now it's an important and interesting subject that I can visualize better than before," he said.

Libby remains the EPA's highest priority in the nation for cleanup, Horinko said.

"In addition, we're looking out across the country to make sure we have no other Libbys out there," she

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Horinko

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The health impacts associated with the asbestos-contaminated vermiculite mined and processed near Libby for more than 60 years have gotten the attention of federal officials at the highest levels.

"We are seeing instances of disease and mortality in Libby that we have not seen at any other site in the nation," Horinko said.

Lincoln County Commissioner Rita Windom told Horinko that the county is committed to helping the EPA achieve a quick cleanup.

"Our constituents are really

concerned that it's not going to be two years, it's going to be three years, it's going to be six years, and we can't put out to the public that we're a clean community," Windom said.

The Libby cleanup work is close to or on the projected timeline, Horinko said.

"For a Superfund, for us to say we'll take 2-3 years is amazing when the average Superfund takes 10 years," Horinko said. "We're working all out, pedal to the metal. This will not be a typical Superfund cleanup."

EPA administrator Christie Todd Whitman made a commitment to clean Libby within a timeline specified by Montana

Governor Judy Martz. "Gov. Whitman's promise is a commitment we intend to keep," Horinko said. "She is personally concerned about what is going on in Libby."

Libby Councilman George Bauer thanked Horinko for taking a stand on removing vermiculite insulation from area homes.

"That's huge," he said. "Everybody's excited about that."

The decision wasn't easy, Horinko said.

"It just seemed like something that had to be done," she said.

Concerns had arisen over the many different ways Libby residents may have been exposed to asbestos, Horinko said. Some people diagnosed with asbestos-related disease had no clear-cut exposure pathway, and it became impossible to isolate the risks posed by living in a house containing vermiculite insulation.

"Finally, at the end of the day it became, what price peace of mind?" Horinko said.

The EPA commitment to the community won't end with cleanup of asbestos-tainted vermiculite.

"One of the lessons we've learned on cleaning up Superfund sites, the cleanup is only one piece of the problem a community faces," she said.

The EPA will work with other federal agencies to find solutions to the asbestos-related

health needs of the community and economic development.

Horinko said.

"To me, as head of the Superfund, it's a crime for the taxpayers to be funding this cleanup," she continued, "when there is a company out there who says 'Whoops, the money is gone.'"

She said, "I share your pessimism with Grace stepping up

to the plate."

Health needs of the community need to be addressed and the EPA will work with several federal agencies on that issue, she said.

"The next big challenge for the federal government to take on is the health care issue," she said. "The health care problem will continue to exist long after the cleanup."

Senators pleased with Horinko's visit

Montana senators are encouraged by the visit to Libby by the head of the EPA's Superfund program on Tuesday.

The visit was requested by U.S. Sen. Max Baucus during a June 20 Senate subcommittee hearing.

Baucus pushed the EPA into making a commitment to work to get the funding needed to provide the town with a clean bill of health. He also secured a commitment from the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry to com-

plete a long-term health plan for the community by mid-summer.

By the end of 2002, the EPA will have spent \$60 million on the Libby cleanup with \$21 million in the fiscal year 2003 budget request.

"I'm pleased to see Mrs. Horinko is taking the time to visit with the people of Libby and see first-hand the challenges they face in the wake of the vermiculite mining," said Sen. Conrad Burns. "I hope this trip will encourage even greater cooperation between

the various agencies that have interest in doing what's right for the families affected by this mine, and the town as a whole."

"I continue to stand by to do what needs to be done to help my friends in Libby."

Soon after the problem was identified in late 1999, Burns helped the community secure \$8 million in undesignated funds for economic development.

He also secured \$3.3 million for needed improvements at St. John's Lutheran Hospital.